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Subject:	FW: Texas health officials will further study Harris County cancer clusters
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Subject: FW: Texas health officials will further study Harris County cancer clusters

Fyi - George

Texas health officials will further study Harris County cancer clusters

San Jacinto River pollution tied to disease clusters

By Susan Carroll

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State health officials took an unprecedented step on Friday in announcing plans for further study of cancer in eastern Harris County after a cluster investigation identified pockets of elevated childhood cancers.

The Department of State Health Service's long-awaited report identified several census tracts near the polluted San Jacinto River with greater-than-expected incidences of childhood cancers of the eyes, skin and brain that prompted state officials to consider a deeper investigation.

"While these cancers are rare and few total cases were identified, the analysis determined that these findings are significant enough to warrant a discussion of whether additional study is feasible," state officials concluded.

The state's examination of nearly two decades worth of Texas cancer registry data involved 38 census tracts covering the river's flood plain and neighborhoods identified by a state public health assessment. The results confirmed what some residents along the river long suspected about the unusually high incidence of rare forms of cancer, particularly those involving children.

"We knew it was going to be bad, but holy cow," said Jackie Young, who grew up two miles from the San Jacinto Waste Pits, a Superfund site on the western bank of the river.

The state's investigation was limited in scope, designed only to determine if there is more of a specific cancer in an area than expected, not to pinpoint causes.

Epidemiologists found elevated levels of childhood eye cancer, known as retinoblastoma, in census tract 2529, which includes the town of Highlands north of Interstate 10 and east of Channelview. The town near the waste pits also had elevated levels of kidney and cervical cancer.

Census tract 2519 near Lake Houston had elevated levels of brain cancer. The state found 23 cases, where it expected to see 13.5. Seven cases involved children - roughly double the expected number.

Researchers found elevated childhood glioma, brain stem cancer, in a census tract north of U.S. Route 90 and east of Texas 8. A neighboring census tract, 2323, had double the expected number of childhood leukemia cases.

The report also identified census tracts with statistically significant elevations of cancers among all ages, including leukemia, lymphoma, myleoma and cancers of the brain, breast, cervix, kindey or liver.

The state's decision to consider more study marked a change from earlier this spring, when it said a comprehensive health study along the river was not recommended.

The state has published more than 260 cluster investigations since 2004, and indentified elevated levels of cancer in about one-in-four reports. But the state has never before recommended the next step - seeing if an epidemiologic study is feasible.

The state's panel will include experts in cancer, epidemiology, toxicology and the environment, officials said.

Chris Van Deusen, a DSHS spokesman, said the state is primarily focused on the elevations of childhood cancers, since adult cancer is far more difficult to study.

"When you're talking about adult cancer, there can be contributing factors over such long period of time," he said.

Lisa Gossett, an assistant professor of environmental management at University of Houston Clear Lake, said the state's report "answers some questions, but it also raises some I'd like to see answered in detail."

Gossett called for the state to pay particular attention to census tracts with elevations of several types of cancer, and those with extraordinarily high elevations.

Both state and federal officials say it is extremely difficult to link elevated cancers with any particular environmental exposure.

Only a handful of residential cancer cluster investigations prompted by community concerns across the nation have resulted in the identification of a environmental trigger, according to a 2012 study led by an Emory University professor.

The census tracts studied by the state outside Houston include a wide swath of eastern Harris County, dotted with Superfund sites and chemical plants and waste disposal and recycling facilities.

For years, Young and others have pointed to a Superfund site on the river's western bank as a possible cause of the cancers. The pits hold toxic paper mill waste that seeped into the river for years, leading to several lawsuits.

Young said she is holding out hope that if the state ultimately approves a full epidemiologic study, it will help identify what is making people sick.

"We've been begging for this for years," Young said. "I just hope people live to see justice. I really do."

More Information

Cluster or chance?

Cancer is a common disease. Half of all men and a third of women are expected to develop cancer in their lifetime. The National Cancer Institute estimates that lifestyle factors, such as diet and tobacco use, cause 50 to 75 percent of cancer deaths. By contrast, the chances of developing cancer because of environmental contaminants are believed to be relatively slight. The Harvard Center for Cancer Prevention estimates 2 percent of cancer deaths are due to environmental pollution.